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PREVIEW

"KIDS OF THE BLACK HOLE": YOUTH CULTURE IN POSTSUBURBIA

by

G. DEWAR MACLEOD

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1998

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

11/27/98  
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## Abstract

"KIDS OF THE BLACK HOLE": YOUTH CULTURE IN POSTSUBURBIA

by

DEWAR MACLEOD

Adviser: Professor David Nasaw

This dissertation is a history of youth culture in postsuburban Southern California. Beginning in the 1960s, suburban areas of Southern California (and the rest of the country) began to undergo changes that would lead, in the 1980s, to the characterization of many such areas as a new social formation -- exurbia, edge cities, or postsuburbia. The areas outlying Los Angeles were no longer simply bedroom communities servicing the center city, but full scale, contained regions. These new types of regions contained industry (increasingly information-technology oriented), office parks, services, and shopping centers, as well as housing tracts. At the same time this new social formation was developing, the lives of young people were changing dramatically in the aftermath of the sixties and the aging of the baby boomers. Adolescents coming of age in the 1970s faced a new set of social, political and economic expectations and opportunities.

"'Kids of the Black Hole'" examines these

transformations in American society by exploring a development that seemed at the time to be sudden and inexplicable -- the explosion of punk rock in seemingly placid suburbs in Southern California (and later throughout the country). Descended from the British punk rock of the 1970s, a mutant offspring was born in the beachside and valley communities of Los Angeles and Orange Counties in the late '70s and early 1980s. This new American version of punk rock, called hardcore, arose not among the working class and artists and bohemians in the cities (as earlier punk rock had), but among the middle class youth in the exurban areas of Southern California. Hardcore took punk rock's anti-establishment message and made it louder, faster, even more angry, and, often, even more violent.

This dissertation examines the history of hardcore punk rock in Southern California, describing the transformation of punk rock from an urban, working class, avant-garde musical form to a postsuburban, middle class, social phenomenon. Combining the methodologies of social history and cultural studies, I examine punk rock musically and aesthetically as well as within the context of the social environment. My purpose is to treat the cultural phenomenon of postsuburban punk rock not simply in musical, formal or stylistic terms, but in social-historical terms as well.



*for*

Esther Day

R. John Day

James H. MacLeod

&

*in memory of*

Barbara MacLeod

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many people large debts for their help in getting me through this dissertation. For help with research, my thanks to Randy Metz, Eddie Egan, Al Flipside, and Tony Reflex. Al was particularly generous in opening up his own personal archives to me, and Tony put me in touch with anyone I needed to know, becoming a valued source of support, and a friend, in the process.

Thanks to friends and colleagues who have stimulated my thinking and given me support over the years: Brian Gamble, David Jacobson, Jack Donovan, Paula Stamatis, Matt Bokovoy, Stephen Duncombe, Janet Donofrio, David Rieth, Larry Fessenden, Diana Linden, Leslie Horowitz, Eva Moskowitz, Simon Middleton, Jon Sterngass, Lisa Robb, Charles Malone, Stephen Shea, Karen Sotiropoulos. My thanks and apologies to those I have forgotten.

Stuart Ewen gave me early encouragement to pursue this project and a helpful reading of the final draft which will make the book much better. For thoughtful readings of excerpts and drafts, thanks especially to Sean McCann and Celia Bland. Thanks also to Celia for being a partner in many real and imagined crimes.

The History Department at the College of Staten Island provided me with more resources than an adjunct is

accustomed to, and a collegial and stimulating environment in which to teach and work. My thanks especially to Maryann Pandullo for her friendship, patience, and chocolate.

Renee Rubin and the Park Slope Childcare Collective nurtured both my daughter and me through much of this dissertation.

Jacobus Schmidt had faith in me every step of the way, and I would not have made it without him.

Without Carol Berkin, I would have never survived graduate school. Among my many debts to her, perhaps most important of all is that she taught me how to be a historian. For that, and her french fries, I will always be grateful. David Nasaw arrived just in time to shepherd this project through. Without his patience and wisdom, I would never have been allowed to write this dissertation, and I would never have written one half as good.

I first conceived of this project when my daughter was a newborn baby. Sinead has made it a joy to get up (early) every morning since the day she was born. Deirdre Day-MacLeod simultaneously managed to write her own dissertation and drag me kicking and screaming through mine. She is the smartest person I know, and for that this dissertation is all the better, and my most treasured companion. Deirdre, the next one is for you. Finally, I dedicate this project to my parents and my parents in-law, all of whom put up with and gave to me more than I ever deserved.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: "Yep, Sid lives all right, and he's now got himself a tan."	1
Chapter One: "Teen Babes in Monsanto": Youth Culture, Mass Culture and Postsuburbia	7
Chapter Two: "Destroy All Music": Punk Rock and the Scholarship of Subculture	51
Chapter Three: "So This is War, Eh?": The Birth of Punk Rock in Los Angeles	71
Chapter Four: "Get Off the Air": Punk, Power Pop, New Wave, and the Aesthetics of Distinction	102
Chapter Five: "Damaged": Hardcore Punk, Consumerism and the Family	137
Chapter Six: "Brats in Battalions": Hardcore Punk Rock, Violence, and the Politics of the Local	168
Conclusion: "The World's A Mess, It's In My Kiss": Growing Up Punk	214
Bibliography	219

Introduction: "Yep, Sid lives all right, and he's now got himself a tan."

Three postwar developments -- suburbia, youth culture and mass culture -- significantly transformed in the decade of the 1970s. Many of those changes have become apparent now, as we approach the end of the century. Urban geographers have described the growth of a new social formation, postsuburbia. Popular critics endlessly comment on the transformation of adolescence and youth culture with the arrival of "Generation X." And scholars have written on the "end of mass culture." This dissertation details a significant moment in the histories of these three related postwar developments. "'Kids of the Black Hole'" examines these transformations in American society by examining a phenomenon that seemed at the time to be sudden and inexplicable -- the explosion of punk rock in seemingly placid suburbs in Southern California (and later throughout the country).

Punk rock developed as a musical form and performance style in the mid 1970s in New York City and became a major social phenomenon in 1976-1977 with the formation of the Sex Pistols and a whole new punk subculture in London. Punk rock attempted to destroy rock'n'roll from within, by reducing it to its most basic formulations. The archetypal

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<sup>1</sup> Kickboy Face, *Slash* Vol. 3, No. 4 (1980), 30. The reference is to the recently OD'd Sid Vicious, bass player for England's most notorious punk band the Sex Pistols.

punk band, New York's Ramones, played the simplest of rock'n'roll: thumping 4/4 beats, buzzsaw guitars without any leads, with a submerged, melodic pop hook.<sup>2</sup>

When punk rock first emerged in Southern California, the developing scene self-consciously echoed and mimicked its predecessors in New York and London. Combining the poetics, artiness, showbiz cool, and goofy naughtiness of the New York bands with the theatricality, rebel politics, and anarchic rage of the British punks, a small group of artists, musicians and neer-do-wells began to gather together in Hollywood and call themselves punks in 1977. In the beginning, I will argue, punk in Los Angeles was mostly an aesthetic, a set of artistic creations. Punk rock music in Hollywood developed largely in response to, in dialogue with, the artistic and musical history of rock'n'roll, and, specifically, the international music business centered in Los Angeles. Punk took hold in Hollywood initially as a musical-artistic response to perceived musical-artistic "deadness." Certainly, there were social issues involved as well as punks encountered the world around them, but for most punks, it was about the music and the music scene.

Around 1980, punk scenes blossomed in communities throughout the area surrounding Los Angeles. The new punk, a mutant offspring called "hardcore," transformed the

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<sup>2</sup> See Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (NY: Penguin, 1993), 166-178.

aesthetic, making both the music and the fashion harsher, more severe, less ironic. But it was not only an aesthetic development that occurred with hardcore. In fact, this dissertation argues, the arrival of hardcore punk reflected transformations in both the position of young people in American society and the landscape of Southern California. Hardcore punk developed less out of musical circumstances than social ones.

Hardcore's emergence occurred first in the suburban towns of the Valleys and the South Bay area in Los Angeles county and in the coastal and nearby towns of Orange County, California. Hardcore appropriated a musical form -- punk -- which seemed to strip rock 'n' roll down to its rudiments and then stripped it down further. Hardcore was faster and louder even than punk itself, with songs often no more than a minute long. Setting its protest solidly in American suburbia, hardcore removed the urban working class and artistic connotations from punk. While suburbia had always been essential to punk, as the place to leave and destroy, now suburbia was subject to assault from within. Bands such as Black Flag and the Middle Class did not abandon their suburban neighborhoods, they sat at the center of growing music scenes which came to them and which they fostered. Young, mostly white and male, and broadly middle class hardcore punks began to gather at hardcore venues throughout the suburban sprawl for performances by such bands as the

Circle Jerks, the Adolescents, and the Minutemen.

Part of this suburban shift relates to the peculiar geography and demographics of Southern California -- where suburbia was no longer suburbia. Beginning in the 1960s, suburban areas of Southern California (and the rest of the country) began to undergo changes that would lead, by the 1980s, to the characterization of many such areas as a new social formation -- exurbia, edge cities, or postsuburbia. The areas outlying Los Angeles were no longer simply bedroom communities servicing the center city, but full scale, contained regions. In the postwar era alone, Orange County (south of L.A.) went from rural to suburban to postsuburban. These new types of regions contained industry (increasingly information-technology oriented), office parks, services, and shopping centers, as well as housing tracts. For bored teenagers, though, this new type of psychogeography represented the worst combination of suburban exile with post-urban desolation.

At the same time as the new social formation of postsuburbia was developing, the lives of young people were changing dramatically in the aftermath of the sixties and the aging of the baby boomers. Adolescents coming of age in the 1970s faced a new set of social, political and economic expectations and opportunities. Hardcore punk reflected as well the changes in the experiences of young people and the discourse of "youth culture" in the aftermath of the 1960s.



Whereas in the fifties and sixties, young people were often seen as part of a generational cohort -- either in rebellion against or enmeshed in the "mass culture" of American society -- by the mid-1970s young people saw themselves only as individuals, without any larger group or society to which to attach themselves. Hardcore punk reflected this individualism, creating a complex and contradictory political stance. Hardcore punks did not go to the city to enact their alienation in the traditional manner of bohemians, avant-gardists, and even earlier punk rockers. They stayed home, reviling yet -- importantly -- attempting to transform their postsuburban environment in the process. Punks tried to affect their environment by fashioning a violent, individualist, anti-political politics of refusal.

The ideologies of youth culture and mass culture failed to unify young people in the 1970s and '80s, nor did the institutions of family, school, work, and consumption. Hardcore punks cohered, instead, around their "scenes" as localized manifestations of what Lawrence Grossberg calls "affective alliances."<sup>3</sup> That is, they came together over a shared feeling produced by a particular musical form. At the same time, however, the scenes were sites for contestation over values, aesthetics and politics. Hardcore punks in Southern California, in general, eschewed any

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

attempt to expand their scenes into a universalizing "movement," focusing, instead, on continually contesting the sets of distinctions and boundaries both within the scenes and between the scenes and the outside world.

In establishing and fighting over their scenes, hardcore punks reflected, rejected and replicated the dominant values of postsuburbia. Through the prism of the contestation over and within scenes, "Kids of the Black Hole" examines the experiences and expectations of young people in the 1970s. Further, by exploring the margins of society -- a minor subculture -- the dissertation sheds light on social, economic and political transformations in the United States with the emergence of postsuburbia.

PREVIEW

## Chapter One: "Teen Babes in Monsanto": Youth Culture, Mass Culture and Postsuburbia

Recently, social critics and the popular media have rediscovered the phenomenon of youth. In the 1990s, debates have raged over the fate of "Generation X," young people coming of age in the late twentieth-century, in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-oil crisis, postmodern America. Commentators have been at a loss as to how to characterize this "generation," a generation with seemingly no soul, no goals, no ideals, no politics. Youth is once again a "problem" in American society, but one that the accepted categories fail to explain.

The inability of critics to comprehend young people in the 1990s derives from a lack of historical perspective. By the early 1970s, the experiences and ideologies of youth in the sixties had become the accepted standard for understanding adolescence and the social phenomena of youth and youth culture. When observers started to notice something they labelled "Generation x" early in this decade, they treated this new phenomenon as if it had arrived suddenly, as if it is only a generational phenomenon, related to the coming of age of the baby-boomers' children. This is certainly part of it. But there is a larger historical transformation at work, one that began in the 1970s.

Scholars identifying the social, structural, economic,

political and cultural influences on today's youth generally do so with little attention to the historical development of both of these influences and the experiences of young people today. Usually, they jump from the sixties to the nineties to show contrast, but the gap in years makes comprehension impossible. The 1970s were key years in the transformation of youth in the U.S., and punk rock highlights those changes.

This chapter will explore the simultaneous rise of the ideas of "youth culture" and "mass culture," and their subsequent decline in the 1970s. I will treat "youth" as a category of ideology, not necessarily a false one, but one rooted in cultural assumptions and expectations broader than simply the experiences of young people. That is, I define "youth" as a category, an idea, flexible and historically in flux. Similarly, mass culture -- "culture mass-produced by industrial techniques" -- can be seen as much an ideological

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James E. Cote and Anton L. Allahar, in *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), pay little attention to the historical roots of contemporary problems for youth. Even more glaring is Mike A. Males account in *Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1996) which depicts the "war on adolescents" as simply an uneven generational conflict between boomers and x'ers. Geoffrey T. Holtz, in *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind "Generation X"* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), makes a similar, though more muted, critique of baby boomers. Typical of historical treatments is Grace Palladino's recent *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic, 1996), which jumps from the end of the 1960s to a brief concluding chapter on adolescents in the 1990s.

category as economic or social.

I will argue, also, that the rise and fall of suburbia and the suburban ideal parallels the intertwined fates of youth culture and mass culture. By the 1970s, all three phenomena were fragmenting in ways that transformed the lives of young people. Finally, I will focus in on the experiences of young people in Southern California in the 1970s as a harbinger of a larger national historical development.

### ***youth and mass culture***

Since at least the late nineteenth century, youth in the United States has been intimately associated with the idea of mass culture. Adolescence as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood emerged in conjunction with the arrival of industrial capitalism -- a process that has been particularly inflected in the U.S. by questions of ethnicity and class.<sup>2</sup> Because the waves of immigration from Europe throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries coincided with the spread of industrial capitalism and a newly consumerized culture, the process of assimilation or "Americanization" has traditionally been the province of

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<sup>2</sup> James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, "Introduction: Six Artistic Cultures," in Naremore and Brantlinger, eds., *Modernity and Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

youth. As early as the 1830s, the Bowery Boys and Gals fostered a working-class youth culture based upon style, leisure time, and consumerism.<sup>4</sup> By the late 19th century, youth were leading the way towards the adoption of the culture of consumption and style. As immigrants or the children of immigrants, teenagers and young adults were interested in fitting in to the society around them; that society was increasingly defined by an urban and urbane sensibility of style and consumerism. For the "children of the city," according to David Nasaw, "It was not simply their spending money but their attitude toward entertainment that would actuate the final stage in the transformation of American culture from the production orientation and work ethic of a Benjamin Franklin to the consumption ethos of *Playboy* magazine."<sup>5</sup>

Young people's experiences differed from those of their parents because of their relationships to the emerging culture industries of the time, such as vaudeville, touring theater groups, and, later, movie theaters. Even as these teenagers and young adults worked to help support the family and had little leisure time or disposable income, their urban environment allowed exposure to a world vastly

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 91-95.

<sup>5</sup> David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work & At Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 196.

different from the rural, isolated, traditional, home-centered, old world. Even young children, as Nasaw has shown, often spent the bulk of their time outside of the family dwelling, on the streets in a barely supervised urban environment, experiencing a world at odds with the one their parents had known as children, and even maybe the one their parents inhabited at that very moment. Importantly, this was not simply a case of immigrant children entering into a different world than their parents'. The world they came to was itself changing dramatically at that time, and the immigrants were essential to shaping it. "Loosening the ties between leisure, mutual aid, and male culture," Kathy Peiss writes, "commercialized recreation fostered a youth-oriented, mixed-sex world of pleasure." Peiss describes the contribution of young working women to this culture, and the contribution of this culture to young working women's identities:

Many young women, particularly the daughters of immigrants, came to identify 'cheap amusements' as the embodiment of American urban culture, particularly its individualism, ideology of consumption, and affirmation of dating and courtship outside of parental control.<sup>6</sup>

As immigrants arrived from Europe by the millions, commercialized public amusements were being developed by (often immigrant) entrepreneurs, and an industrial working

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<sup>6</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 6, 10.

class began to identify itself, at least in part, in terms of its participation in a culture of consumption. The process of Americanization, then, often involved the mixing of old-world traditions, new-world experiences, and mass culture dreams. Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen tell the wonderful story of Anna Kuthan, for whom the process of Americanization began when, as a child factory worker in Czechoslovakia and, later, a servant in Vienna, she saw the colorful labels of American-made goods -- the images providing the basis for her dreams of moving to the United States. Americanization was, of course, not limited to young people, but they were most open to the "channeling of desire" by the culture industries, and the process led to conflicts between generations, as old-world traditions clashed with mass culture visions.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have debated whether the spread of mass culture was led by the working class or the middle class. Peiss, in particular, emphasizes the contributions of young working women to the new mass culture. But the whole notion of mass culture makes such categories and boundaries unstable. Class categories and consciousness became increasingly bound up with identities formed through leisure. As David Nasaw argues, the "ambiguities over

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992; 2nd ed.), 24-28.